

ENGLISH NIGHTMARES AND GERMAN ASPIRATIONS. THE BACKGROUND TO SPOHR'S
"FALL OF BABYLON".

by Peter Skrine

'Belshazzar's Feast', a mezzotint of the famous painting by John Martin, hung on the parlour wall at Howarth Parsonage; his 'Fall of Babylon' was greeted with public and critical acclaim when it was exhibited at the British Institute in 1819 and was described as 'thrilling with the strange and felicitous expression'. In his book on the 'Art of John Martin' (Oxford 1975), William Feaver reminds us that Martin was the leading popular artist of his day and that on the strength of his numerous prints his grandiosely lurid depictions of impending doom and disaster became better known at home and abroad than those of any other British artist in the nineteenth century.

This situation should be borne in mind as the background to the request which the Norwich-born civil engineer turned musicologist, Edward Taylor, made to Spohr during a coach-ride between London and Norwich in 1839; a new oratorio on the Fall of Babylon was in keeping with the vogue prevalent at the time for melodramatic scenes of cataclysm: Bulwer-Lytton's novel 'The Last Days of Pompeii' had delighted readers in 1834, and the subject of Belshazzar's Feast and Babylon's Fall had been the subject of recent writing, too. 'Belshazzar', a dramatic poem by the talented author Henry Hart Milman, seems an obvious model on which Taylor might have based the text of the oratorio. In fact Edward Taylor harked further back to an earlier literary treatment of the subject for his inspiration: the sacred drama 'Belshazzar' by Hannah More (1745-1833), a writer born in the year of Handel's treatment of the theme, and whose popularity was solidly established amongst the general English reading public. Her piece, deliberately written for the young, a class of readers for whom, as she says, it is not easy to accommodate one's subject, so as to be at once useful and interesting (Preface to Volume II of the Works, London 1818), was clearly the model which suggested many a passage in the text of the oratorio. 'Fill me that massy goblet to the brim!' Belshazzar commands; 'Reveal your dark intent,' he entreats the writing on the wall; while Queen Nicotris recommends the young prophet Daniel 'before whose sight ev'n the page of dark futurity lies open'; all these lines have their clear antecedents in Hannah More's 'Fill me that massy goblet to the brim'; 'Explain your dark intent'; and 'pow'r to look into the secret page / of dim Futurity's mysterious volume'. Clearly Taylor was greatly helped by Hannah More's example, and no doubt sensed that it would be to his oratorio's advantage if it contained verbal echoes of a popular authoress as well as visual associations with the works of a much admired contemporary artist.

But what about Spohr in all this? It is known that he had difficulties with his friend's English text and preferred to work from a German version which had then to be re-translated into acceptable, singable English. From his point of view, I doubt if the subject of the new oratorio aroused the same associations it did for its English audiences. He was of course already the successful author of a 'Last Judgement' which qualified him particularly well for the musical treatment of another cataclysmic subject with apocalyptic dimensions; but from what we know about him, there is little or nothing to suggest that his imagination was kindled at the prospect of creating a musical analogue to the fantastic fusion of moral retribution and nightmarish pandemonium which Martin's canvasses and prints conjured up out of his observations of the flaming smoke-swept townscapes of the Industrial Revolution, and which held his British contemporaries in confused, fascinated and fearful

thrall. For Spohr the significance of his new subject, the Fall of Babylon, lay elsewhere.

The most immediately arresting portion of the oratorio occurs not where one might expect it - the fatal feast itself - but earlier on, in the first half, when Cyrus and his Persian soldiers begin their final advance on the doomed city (No.7). 'Haughty Babylon, heaven's vengeance like the thunderbolt shall fall!' Cyrus sings, and the chorus rises to his call with the words 'Proud monarch, arise! prepare for the fight!' The brisk swagger of the piece - an army in the right and on its unstoppable march to victory - is reminiscent in musical line and layout to, of all things, 'Le Chant du départ', Mehul's great revolutionary hymn, where the solo voice's 'La liberté guide nos pas' is offset by the chorus's 'La republique nous appelle; sachons vaincre ou sachons périr!' - 'Hail the hour of freedom near!' sings Cyrus, as the chorus repeats the phrases 'The arm of our chief shall quell thy pride. Aloud thy crimes for vengeance call, the lightning gleams, - the bolt shall fall!' Is there not a similarity here to the revolutionary fervour of 'Le peuple souverain s'avance, tyrans, descendez au cercueil!'? Not that there is any deliberate imitation on Spohr's part; it is simply that, to our surprise, a number in an early Victorian oratorio written for the Norwich Festival is imbued with the same spirit of defiance as Mehul's overtly political hymn, and proclaims the fall of tyrants and a call to freedom which is a far cry from the English religious music of the time. Why should this be?

In 1815 Byron had written a poem addressed 'To Belshazzar' - the weakest and worst of despots. 'unfit to govern, live, or die'. Not published until 1831, it was anticipated in 1813 by one of the most haunting of Heinrich Heine's early poems, 'Belsatzar', published in the *Gedichte* (= poems) of 1822. Heine was the most widely known German poet of the 1820s and 1830s, and there can be no doubt that almost everybody, including Spohr and his circle, knew the poem. It is a retelling of the biblical tale of Belshazzar's Feast with a sub-text concealed within it (strict censorship was imposed in post-Napoleonic Germany especially after the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819) linking the biblical episode to the petty despots and tyrants of Heine's own time. They governed many a German state, and Spohr knew one of them at first hand.

The Electoral Prince of Hesse-Cassel, Spohr's employer ('he cannot be designated by a more courteous title' wrote the anonymous author of *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, London 1872) had come to power as his father's co-regent in 1831 on a wave of constitutional sentiment enthusiastically shared by the composer ('Er ist sehr liberal Gesinnung', wrote his friend Moritz Hauptmann: 'he is very liberal in his views'). But the benevolent smile soon faded from his face to reveal the underlying arrogance of a despot, and his world-famous court composer was soon having to submit to a quite intolerable display of arbitrary power. In 1836 the Electoral Prince objected to Spohr's second marriage; in 1837 he suddenly ordered the cancellation of his Cassel music festival, and in 1839 he found fault with him for taking leave of absence four days early to attend the Norwich Festival for a performance of his oratorio 'Calvary'. Scarcely had he returned to Cassel than Professor Taylor sent him the text of 'The Fall of Babylon'; the project could not have come at a more opportune moment. 'Filled with real inspiration for the task, he devoted thereto every leisure hour', writes the author of the continuation to the *Autobiography*; and this was not surprising, for the subject provided just the opportunity he needed to express his pent-up personal and political feelings and his rage and resentment at the way in which all the high hopes of 1830 had been crushed. It was a disappointment shared by a great many thinking Germans during the 'Vormärz' period of 1830-48, a period when, in many parts of the German-speaking world, disillusionment alternated with a spirit of

national renewal and calls for radical reform. Though not a member of the Young German Movement (how could he be?), Spohr shared the aspirations of his contemporaries. But how could he convey them?

It is often said that of all the arts music is the least capable of making specific statements; it can evoke moods but it can seldom if ever make a more direct comment. If that is so, Spohr's 'Fall of Babylon' is a remarkable exception which for that reason deserves to be better known. The subject of the oratorio and its biblical text imply condemnation of tyranny in general and, as we have seen, there is genuine revolutionary fire of a more up-to-date kind in some of the music. But the oratorio also contains biting touches of satire, too, worthy of Heine. A telling example occurs as Part II opens. Most commentators either dismiss the banquet choruses as rubbish or try to explain them away as instances of Spohr's inability to strike an appropriately Waltonian tone - for Walton's reworking of the subject in 1931 was bound to provide a barrier to our appreciation of Spohr's oratorio which it has taken more than fifty years to overcome. 'While Beauty's sweet smiles beaming brightly around awaken new joys and give zest to our wine...' sing the ladies of Babylon; and the city's young gentlemen reply: 'Haste, haste, gallant youths, O what pleasure awaits us! No cares shall intrude on our revels tonight; Hark! music invites us, her strains how entrancing! The joys of the dance shall crown our delight.' The words of the banqueting scene are closer to Regency glee than to Old Testament grandeur, and their lilting musical setting in compound triple time is far removed from the purposeful step of the Persian soldiers, whose march on the doomed city has been drawing nearer and nearer since the Overture. The music of the banqueting scene would not be out of place in a Savoy opera; it is redolent of the vapid, shallow prettiness and bad taste one associates with the drawing-rooms and soirees at which the blue-blooded and the privileged consorted with the nouveaux-riches: the Co-Regent's father had been forced to quit his throne in 1831 because of his liaison with Countess Reichenbach - or so he called her - the daughter of a Berlin jeweller. Such music was never meant to be taken at face value - least of all by Spohr in the satirical mood he was in in 1839/40, when the present seemed so third-rate compared to the past, or indeed the future; had he not just 'sent up' the music of the New Babylon in the last movement of his 'Historical Symphony' (Op.116), first given in London during that same visit in 1839, with its mockingly audible allusions to Meyerbeer, Berlioz, and the rest? Had he not cast himself as a new Daniel amidst the musical lions of Louis-Philippe's Paris and its German and English admirers?

Belshazzar's defiance and his mother's admonitions, with their anticipations of John of Leyden and Fides in Meyerbeer's 'Le Prophete', lead on to the episode (No.23) in which the tyrant is confronted by the writing on the wall. At this point Spohr's intense involvement with the contemporary implications of the oratorio are declared by a striking musical touch. How would any other composer have set or conveyed the writing on the wall, those mystic symbols which fill the tyrant with 'wild and terrible forebodings'? None would have come up with Spohr's uniquely individual idea: the eerie sound of a lone violin, its leaping figurations in semiquavers accompanying a piccolo descending in crotchets. This was how the Electoral Prince's Kapellmeister, the great violinist of his age, pronounced his personal indictment of Friedrich Wilhelm of Hesse and all who would stifle the freedom of men and artists. 'O what is Man, by all his pomp attended, the pride of birth, the boast of princely might, the victor's laurel, and the monarch's height?' As the Israelitish man and woman yearn for their release from bondage (No.8) and look forward to the return of long-lost joys (No.16), that was the message of Spohr's work to those who had ears to hear. The first performance

took place on Good Friday 1841 in Cassel. In 1842, despite the good offices of the Duke of Cambridge, former Viceroy of Hanover, Spohr was refused leave to attend the Norwich Festival once more and witness the triumph of his last oratorio.